



TESTIMONY OF DR. JAMES DAVIS
PRESIDENT, PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY
New York City Council Preliminary FY26 Budget Hearing - Higher Education
March 13, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairs Dinowitz and Brannan and Council members. On behalf of the 30,000 faculty and staff represented by PSC/CUNY, thank you for your continued advocacy on behalf of the City University of New York. The Council's consistent support has helped stem the tide.

These investments are helping CUNY to serve its growing student body; since November 2024 enrollment has risen 3%. This includes a 6% increase at the community colleges and 4% in new graduate students.¹ And as I said at last year's Council Preliminary Budget Hearing, CUNY no longer faces an enrollment crisis so much as a crisis of student retention and understaffing. These problems are deeply related. Students stay enrolled when they have the support they need from faculty and staff. To continue supporting our students and the upward mobility of the city workforce, CUNY's community colleges need your continued investment.

Challenge the national threat to public higher education

I cannot speak about the Mayor's executive budget without first addressing the assault on federal agencies and services now taking place, including programs on which our members and students rely.

On Wednesday evening, the Trump Administration cut the Department of Education by 1,300 employees, after offering early retirement to an additional 600, and following an attempt to cut two teacher preparatory programs, which has been so far prevented by the courts.² The Trump Administration is determined to use higher education as the wedge to divide Americans on everything from free speech to diversity and equity to research. Life-saving medical studies are grinding to a halt,

¹ [CUNY Chancellor Matos Rodríguez Announces Second Consecutive Enrollment Increase at 2024 State of the University – The City University of New York](#)

² <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/11/trump-administration-teacher-training-blocked>

and universities are targeted for draconian cuts. The thinnest of pretexts have been used to justify these efforts, which are really attacks on knowledge itself, on the project to create an educated citizenry. Just last night, for example, I learned that one of CUNY's most prominent Public Health experts had an NIH-funded grant to research vaccine hesitancy canceled. This casualty of the Project 2025 approach to medical and health research not only harms the individual faculty and students in the lab, it threatens to set us back decades in the quest for safety and medical progress. Please your position as elected officials to advocate to preserve our research funding.

Our students also have a target on their backs. Nearly one in three CUNY students was born in another country, and some are undocumented. The overtures Mayor Adams has made to Immigration and Customs Enforcement seeking entry to sensitive locations, including our schools, has intensified the anxiety. Faculty have reported students are sometimes failing to show up to class when reports of seeing ICE circulate through their neighborhood. Federal authorities unlawfully detained Mahmoud Khalil last week, a former Columbia student protester, despite his status as a legal permanent resident with a green card, and without charging him with a crime. His attempted deportation demonstrates that members of our campus communities are not safe in their academic and career pursuits. As Higher Education Committee members, you must do everything you can to safeguard civil liberties and constitutional rights in this precarious moment.

PSC request for Fiscal Year 2026

Our members are committed to helping students achieve their full potential. But there are simply not enough faculty and staff on our campuses to ensure students get the attention they deserve and the classes they need. Our request of **\$140 million** is laid out below. We ask you to support this request in addition to the items prioritized by Speaker Adams in her response to the Mayor's preliminary executive budget.

PSC members can't effectively educate and support students in a chronically under-funded system. While Governor Hochul's executive budget continues to increase support for public higher education, and Speaker Adams proposes baselining funds for CUNY Reconnect, Mayor Adams' FY26 budget is, at best, flat after years of cuts.

- Restorations: The Mayor's Preliminary FY26 Budget fails to restore the \$95 million taken away since the beginning of his term. We urge this council to put back what was lost in several rounds of PEGs. We applaud the Council's restoration of \$15 million during the last budget cycle. We must restore more to help bring back faculty and staff lost during COVID and better serve our students. (\$80M)
- We applaud the Council's request to baseline funds for CUNY Reconnect with \$8.8 million to continue the program and another \$2.9 million for its expansion. CUNY Reconnect successfully brought back over 47,000 CUNY students since its pilot in 2022-2023.³ (\$11.7 million)

³ Speaker Adrienne Adams, State of the City, March 4, 2025

- The Mayor’s Preliminary Budget leaves ASAP funding flat. Not fully funding this program is a lost opportunity to improve retention and forces tough choices as enrollment grows. Our proposed \$35.5 million ASAP-for-all model would provide students with academic support in CUNY’s most successful and nationally recognized program. ASAP’s system of full financial aid, robust wraparound services, and high-contact advising leads to a graduation rate twice that of non-ASAP students. That’s what the college experience should be for every CUNY student, and we need more funding to get us closer to that goal. Unfortunately, right now, we are eroding ASAP instead. At Borough of Manhattan Community College, ASAP funding for textbooks has dropped from \$150 per student per semester to \$60 per student per semester. As students continue to return to CUNY we must not force our colleges to spread resources thinner. (\$35.5 million)

- Advisors: We agree with the CUNY administration. We need a more diverse pool of advisors and too many of our campuses are understaffed. We support CUNY’s request for \$2.9 million for more academic advisors and \$9.1 million to expand ACE - the senior college version of ASAP. According to CUNY, “The most recent ACE freshmen cohort admitted to John Jay College realized a four-year graduation rate of 60 percent vs. 41 percent for a matched comparison group of non-ACE students, and the first transfer cohort at Lehman College realized a two-year graduation rate of 61 percent vs. 30 percent for a matched comparison group of non-ACE students. These effects are so large that they actually reduce the average cost per graduate by about 13 percent.” (\$12 million)

- Metrocards: A key component to ASAP’s success is the allocation of a free metrocard to participating students. We regularly hear from students, faculty and staff that too many students do not make it to class or risk punishment when they evade a fare because they do not have the funds available to commute to campus. We support the Administration’s \$500,000 pilot program to provide metrocards, but urge it be funded for \$1 million. (\$1 million)

- Supporting public safety with more health professionals: The Governor, Mayor and Progressive Caucus have plans to address the shortage of healthcare and mental health professionals. They’ll all need CUNY to succeed.
 - CUNY is essential to building out networks of nurses, social workers, mental health counselors, addiction services and others needed to help stabilize the city’s social safety net. CUNY graduates approximately half of the city’s nurses each year, there are hundreds of students from the Silberman School of Social Work, CUNY has a growing medical school, and there are dozens of teaching programs across the University. Governor Hochul has proposed the Opportunity Promise Scholarship Program that would provide 60 free community college credits to older students who can return to CUNY and study in high-demand fields like nursing. And the Progressive Caucus’ Crisis to Care proposal would be instrumental to helping the thousands of New Yorkers that are in crisis. But CUNY’s community colleges must be fully funded and adequately staffed to receive and graduate more students into the workforce. We support CUNY’s FY26 budget request of \$4.2 million to initiate a Nursing Education Fellowship Program, expand the capacity for clinical placements, training and increase enrollment. (\$4.2 million)

 - Fund the People’s Plan. To ensure our city does not fall back into the cycle of dysfunction, there must be a plan to make the city affordable and invest in long-term public safety solutions that

focus on eliminating the obstacles and not criminalization of people in need. The education system has consistently proven to be the best antidote to addressing the crises we face. The People's Plan prioritizes the immediate needs of public safety with investments in mental health and substance abuse programs with the long-term affordability needs of access to education, childcare and housing.

Conclusion

This mayoral administration targeted CUNY for cuts during the pandemic and continued as the pandemic receded. Our community colleges are on the road to recovery, but now face a new threat. It is not an exaggeration to say the new challenges the University faces from Washington are unprecedented in our lifetime. But this council can take action to ensure our great public university not only survives, but thrives. CUNY's enrollment continues to climb toward pre-pandemic figures; this council has worked to turn back years of austerity budgets and we still need you. Students, faculty and staff at CUNY need you to stand with us. Stand with us to defend public higher education from threats from Washington and ensure that CUNY grows, continuing to support the economy, workforce, culture, and civic life of our great city.